

Sermon Text: Luke 5:1-11

Now, this gives me an opportunity every time it comes up as a preaching text to tell a couple of fishing stories, short fishing stories.

Two guys went on a fishing trip, and they had to rent everything – their reels, their rods, their wading suits, their rowboat, their car, and even the cabin in the woods. They spent a fortune! The first day they went out fishing, and they didn't catch a thing. The second day, they went out fishing. They didn't catch a thing. The third day they went – nothing! Finally, on the last day of the vacation, one of the guys, one of the two men finally caught a fish. On the drive home, they were just depressed and silent, and one of them was pecking away at a calculator, and he figured up what it cost. He said, “Do you realize that this one lousy fish cost us \$1,500.00?” The other guy said, “Whoa! It's a good thing we didn't catch anymore.” I think that was originally a Clemson joke, but I wouldn't tell it that way. I wouldn't tell it that way.

Now, one more fishing story. It's also a preacher's story. The Reverend Doctor McStuffed Shirt encountered one of his less than faithful parishioners returning from a day's fishing on a Sunday and not in church, and he engaged him in conversation. He said, “Brother Jones, you are a fine fisherman I know, but I am a fisher of men.” Jones was determined to get home after a long day. He said, “So I have heard, but I was passing your church on Sunday, last Sunday, and I looked in the window, and I noticed you've got a lot more room in your bucket.” And so do we. It's too true.

Our Gospel reading is where we get that old catchphrase “fishers of men” as it says in the King James or in the new RSV. Fishers of people, of men and women, and it's also a pretty good fishing story. Peter was impressed with Jesus, who had just healed his mother-in-law. Peter let Jesus use his boat to back away from the shore so that Jesus could use the water's surface as sort of a natural amplification as He preached to the crowd of people. Now while Jesus taught, bone-tired Peter was washing his nets and calling it a day, and I guess he was listening to Jesus preach and teach over his shoulder. He and his partners had been out fishing all night long, and they caught nothing so I'm sure he was glad to give the boat to Jesus to use to preach from. It hadn't done him any good.

When the preaching was over, Simon Peter and his friends were ready to get home for some shuteye and nothing to look forward to except another day's fishing and hopefully a good catch. Well, Peter's eyes were half open, and his feet were pointed towards home, and Jesus said, “Wait up! Put your nets out into the deep for another catch. Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” Now, the Greek here is sort of funny. The word for deep is a word that means the depth of danger and mystery. Trust me and throw your very livelihood into the depths of danger and mystery and see what happens. I am sure that after trying all night and catching nothing, Peter said, “What! You know this is not the time to go fishing in the day, and the fish are not biting anyway, and Rabbi, he

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thought this, you may be special in a lot of things, but you're a carpenter, not a fisherman. I just want to go home.”

But something about Jesus overcame his reluctance, and he said, “Master, we've worked hard all night, and haven't caught anything, but if you say so, we'll let down our nets.” He was obedient, but not enthusiastic. He called his partners, James and John, and together they sailed their two boats out from the shore into the deep. Here's the fish story. The catch was humongous, or a new word that I have learned, ginormous. I don't think that's in the dictionary yet, but you know what it means. It was too big for one boat. It was even too big for two boats. They all filled with flopping, slippery fish. The boats were in danger of going under, and Simon had never seen anything like it. He said, “Whoa! What is going on here? Who is this Rabbi, Jesus?”

As the Gospel account tells it, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” You see, Peter knew at once that he was in the presence of the Holy, and in the presence of the Holy just as when we perceive that we are in the presence of the Holy, we also perceive who we are in relationship to the Holy. He felt and he confessed his sin.

You know, a few years ago, as the Chair of the Nominations Committee, or now we call it the Lay Leadership Committee, I asked a member to take a leadership position in the church, and he told his wife and he told me that he didn't feel worthy for that position, and his wife asked him, “When will you be worthy?” When will you be worthy? Serve anyway.

Jesus, when Peter said, “I'm a sinful man, get away,” I imagine only smiled. What He said was, “Don't be afraid. From now on you will catch people, sinner or not.” The conclusion is simple. They pulled their boats up on shore. They left everything, and they followed Him. The biggest miracle here is not the incredible catch of fish. It is them dropping their business, their home, their livelihood, their way of life and following Jesus. Jesus caught them, and then He sent them to catch others for God. To catch people. Down through two millennia of Christian history, that is how every generation of followers of Jesus, until ours, has seen themselves and understood their calling, our calling, to catch people.

The word for that is evangelism, and it is a word that makes good middle-class Methodists squirm and fan themselves.

Paul Harvey has noted that too many Christians are no longer fishers of men, but keepers of the aquarium. That's an ouch!

Our strength comes from worship and prayer, but our job is out there and starts the minute we leave here.

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A rural congregation once stood at the intersection of five country roads, and when the new pastor stuck little red pins where all his members were, he noticed that the majority of his members were on the North side and on the South side of that intersection, but he had almost nobody on the East and the West. He wondered why they were clustered that way so he asked an older member. She said, “Well, you see, Joe and Melva Quimley used to live up there on the North road, and then they bought a farm, and they moved down on the South side. The Quimleys were friends, faithful, delightful people, and they were always inviting folks to church, and some of them came and some of them stayed and joined us.” Simple and effective. One family’s witness had built a church wherever they lived.

I know that you’re tired of hearing about debt. Well, I’m tired of talking about it, too. We all know what it will take to make that talk go away. Okay. I’m going to move that to one side.

We have another debt. A debt to one who called us into the family of God, and just as Jesus called Peter and James and John, Jesus called us, and calls us to call others. We have a debt to the one who gave us forgiveness, grace, love, and life eternal, a debt to continue His ministry of making new disciples. We dare not sit down and say, “I’ve got mine! Thank you, God.”

Two churches ago, I brought in five grown men by baptism and profession of faith. Over a period of four years, that’s not an amazing thing, but for me, it was a personal, pastoral best. It took visiting in their homes. It took visiting in their places of business. For one, it took visiting in a bar before the decision was finally made to profess faith, to be baptized, for the very first time to join a church. Now, I can’t ride on that forever. We have made a goal for this year of ten new members in one year by profession of faith. A pastor can’t do that. We must all do that. We have a goal to reach out beyond this beautiful aquarium and do what Jesus told us to do, to be fishers of men and women for God, offering them forgiveness, grace, love, and life eternal. That’s good bait! That’s good news!

What if each one of us reached out there and brought them in, then fed them when they got here, and then sent them out to reach more! That would be a good plan, and it seems to be Jesus’ plan. Personal invitation. Some of you have already felt and have told me, you’ve felt God’s spirit working on you to step up and do some new things, to be brave enough to speak up and to invite new people to worship here. I know that that is happening. I urge you to act on those urgings of God’s spirit.

As far as sharing our faith with others, I have asked, and we have been satisfied with too little. We’re sort of on cruise control. I’m asking you today to refuse to cruise. I used to give a talk sometimes to football teams when they asked the pastor to do that, and I said, “You know from the basic high school physics, if you coast downhill where do you always end up? At the bottom with no more energy.”

“Keepers of the Aquarium”

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Beyond the debt to the bank, we have a debt to God in Christ to make disciples of every race and every nation on earth, and from every neighborhood and from every social stratum in Greenwood. That is our calling. We have had success. We have grown; now we can grow more. Not because I say, but because Jesus said. Making disciples is why we exist. It is time to stop being keepers of the aquarium and start fishing out in the deep, in the depths of danger and mystery and see what happens.

Why would you do that? You would do that because God is real and because God has made a difference in your life, and that’s your story, let me tell you about it. But Lord, we’ve fished all night. We’ve tried it before. We’ve knocked on doors, and we caught nothing. I know! I hear you! Cast out deeper.

As I told the folks at 8:30, I have had people say a sort of a prayer. I remember one man. I knocked on his door, deeply inactive guy, and he said, “Oh, God, it’s the preacher!” Bam! Slammed it in my face! I’ve had other moments when I’ve tried and caught nothing. Just keep on! Maybe not enthusiastically, but obediently, keep on! Take your nets and put out again, deeper. Trust and obey. God will provide a catch, a harvest, and a return on His investment in you. That’s the plan. That’s God’s plan, and you, we, are all a part of it. Amen.